Embedded Media and Military Families

by

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Purpose

- Understand the relationship between embedded media reporting and military families

- Recommendations
- Future Research

Agenda

- Background
  - Embedded Media
  - Military Families
- Methods
  - Procedure
- Findings
- Recommendations
- Questions

Background

- Embedded Reporting
  - Social history of reporting in wars
- Military Families
  - Demands of military family life
  - Deployments
- Military Families and Communication
  - Social history of communication between home and war front
  - One-way (lag) versus two-way (real-time) communication

Methods

- Procedure
  - Two visits
    - March 30-April 1, 2003
    - May 30-June 1, 2003
  - large military installation in the southeastern U.S.
  - 20 face-to-face interviews with civilian wives of deployed soldiers
  - 2 face-to-face interviews with uniformed spouses of deployed soldiers
  - 4 face-to-face interviews with key community members 100 questionnaires
  - observational research in the community

Findings

- Mass Media
  - *Compulsive Viewers*
  - *Controlled Viewers*
  - *Constrained Viewers*
- Expanded Definition of the Military Family
- Wives
- Children
- Rear Detachment Command
- Family Readiness Groups
- Coping Strategies

Compulsive Viewers

- Wives watching eight or more hours per day of war coverage.
  - CNN, Fox, MSNBC 24-hour coverage
  - Slept with the news on and waking periodically
  - Videotaped coverage when not home
  - Initial habit that waned with time

"I watched TV all day even though I knew it was not good for me… I felt anxious about things when not watching—then I'd go on-line and monitor."

Controlled Viewers

- Wives who developed a system for viewing TV coverage, usually in chunks
  - Viewing in the morning and evenings
  - 30 minutes to 2 hour chunks
  - Recommended by the FRG leaders to all wives

"… for the most part I was pretty much glued to the TV… I mean, I didn't like, not let us do anything. I wasn't stuck in the house where me and him [her son] couldn't do anything--I wasn't like that."

Constrained Viewers

- Wives watching no television coverage at all
  - Shielding young children
  - Concern for being overexposed
- NOTE: War coverage pervasive throughout the community

"I don't watch TV at all, I get too upset. I don't want to use the computer or Internet because it might block his call. I get information from other people."

Expanded Definition of the Military Family

- Mass media coverage expanded the military family beyond the traditional boundary
  - fiancées and girlfriends
  - parents and in-laws
  - extended kin and fictive kin
  - community members
- FRG, RDC, and on-post community responsibilities expanded

"…I didn't even know they were on TV and my dad, he gets up at some ungodly hour in the morning, like 3:30 or something, and said that he had seen the CAV and so I turned it on CNN then and they were on. I called my husband's mom just to let her know and then she called her mom and her sister and then they started calling me. … They called just to see if I was watching it and to find out. They don't really know a lot just because they don't live here and so I was explaining to them…"

Wives

- Cross-section of wives of a combat unit (N=24)
- Mostly young but a range of ages and ranks
- Many worked outside home
- Range of experiences with the war
- Developed new independent living skills
- Assisted one another formally and informally
- Most difficulties
  - anxiety about mission
  - length of deployment
  - expanded role to others from outside community
- Missed wives e.g., left community, isolated, not available

"…maybe if somebody had an idea of how to provide the same sort of emotional support or connection during the deployment regardless of who happens to be married or whose wife happens to be a stay-at-home versus a working wife…"

Children

- 55 children
- 2.4 children per family
- New borns to 19 years of age
- Wide range of reactions
  - e.g., anti-social behavior, adult role acquisition, etc.
- Similar media monitoring as mothers
- School reactions ranged but mostly positive
  - (note: more research is needed here)

"…you are not going to tell me that my 2 year old does not understand that their daddy is fighting and I am going to look them in the face and tell them … you are a liar, he does. My two year old sits there and looks at the TV. He may not know what the word fight means, but he knew what hurt meant. He understands…"

Rear Detachment Command(er): The RDC

- Active duty officer commanding the rear area
  - Role as the rear-commander
  - Significant responsibilities expanded by mass media reporting
  - Provided context for families relative to mass media reporting
  - Proactive information flow vs. re-active crisis-action role

"…He did a real good job—the RDC—explaining what exactly my husband does. My husband is patrolling. Then is talked about "destructability" of [armor]. He talked about what happens when a tank is hit. He was saying that if all else fails, they can still live. He speculated about positive scenarios…"

Family Readiness Groups

- Most units at the post had a FRG
- Excellent on-post community family support
- "Our unit" FRG = both a formal and informal social network for overcoming the natural effects of separation due to a deployment
  - Captain's wife
  - FRG leaders were highly supportive
  - Some perception of wearing husband's rank
  - FRG leadership with expanded responsibilities due to media
  - coverage and extended family network

"…We have a little bit more participation [in the FRG] *now that the guys have left. … I think that we have one of the best ones and that is another reason that I didn't want to leave. … I think we are very close knit like our points of contact. We are very, very close. All of us are very close. We do stuff since the guys have been gone. It makes it a little bit easier…"*

Coping Strategies

- Wives and children coped reasonably well
- Great deal of anxiety but seeking equilibrium
- Active wives and children coped better
- Employed/structured work wives coped better
- Controlled viewers coped better than “hypodermic needle” media consumers
- Again, uncertain about those we missed

“Most of the time, my bad days aren’t days. They’re more like bad moments when I’m really, really missing him. I will call my girlfriends from work and we will go and do something. Getting out of the house is a big one. If I start to feel down or something, I will just go to Wal-Mart…just something to get out of the house …”

Recommendations

- Families
  - Educate families to self-regulate regarding war in the home
  - Recognize extended kin and others significant to the soldier
  - Identify and assist at-risk families

- Communication/Social Support
  - Lag versus real-time information
  - Develop a “Scoopline”
  - Establish an FRG newsletter
  - Establish an e-mail distribution list
  - Brief spouses face-to-face on the mission of the unit
  - Provide mentors or “buddies”

Recommendations

- Children
  - Create “Support Bulletin Boards” in the schools
- Administrative
  - Develop “Spouse Leave” forms
  - Acquire Army Knowledge On-Line (AKO) accounts
  - Rethink casualty notifications
  - Create a unit-level deployment archive
- Conduct research
  - Qualitative for depth of understanding
  - Quantitative for generalizability

Questions.

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